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## THE RETENTION AND ATTRITION OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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*This article reports the results of a study of the retention of principals in Catholic elementary and secondary schools in one Midwestern diocese. Findings revealed that personal needs, career advancement, support from employer, and clearly defined role expectations were key factors in principals' retention decisions. A profile of components of successful retention is included.*

Retaining Catholic school principals in a climate in which fewer individuals seek the principalship as a career is of growing importance. Catholic school principals are leaving their positions, and the number of candidates to fill their places is declining. According to Canavan (2001), education researchers have noted difficulty in attracting principals to Catholic schools in the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. The scarcity of candidates for principalships underscores the need to promote principal retention. Moreover, recent studies indicate that while many teachers pursue administrative preparation programs for service as a principal, few actually desire to move into administration (Hine, 2003).

Schools in both public and private sectors struggle to retain principals. A study of elementary and middle-school principals conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals in 1998 reported that the 42% turnover that existed between 1988 and 1998 was likely to continue into the next decade (Doud & Keller, 1998). The average age of building principals has risen steadily over the past 20 years, and increasing numbers are retiring (Cusick, 2003). Additionally, school principals are leaving their jobs for reasons other than retirement (Hertling, 2001).

Factors contributing to retention problems have been attributed to the demanding, ever-increasing workload, skyrocketing stress (Hertling, 2001; Holdaway, 1999; Moos, 1999), long hours, low pay, few perks, and limited respect associated with the principal's role (Ramsey, 1999). Additional factors include the imbalance between authority given and level of accountability

expected (Educational Research Service, 2000). In small and rural districts, the increased demands for special programs, collaborative decision-making, heightened accountability, increasing diversity of rural communities, and the potential for conflict with school boards and other constituencies discourage retention (Howley & Pendarvis, 2002).

In a climate of augmented societal expectations for student achievement, the issue of leadership continuity assumes greater importance. Continuity of leadership has been linked with school success in both public and private sectors (Guerra, 2000). A recent study of the factors affecting the success of a mathematics reform effort in Philadelphia high schools (Greater Philadelphia Secondary Mathematics Project, 2003) notes that both teacher and administrator attrition caused heavy impacts on the success of such efforts. "Seen from a multi-year perspective, the degree of change in organization and personnel severely constrained support for teachers in terms of professional development time, incentives for teachers to participate in training, and classroom support" (Greater Philadelphia Secondary Mathematics Project, 2003, p. 2). The authors go on to note three significant negative effects of administrator turnover: (a) a need to continually re-orient and re-commit new administrators to a reform effort; (b) adjustment to new assessment systems which seem associated with administrator change; and, (c) decision-making paralysis while subordinate or reform leaders wait for chief administrators to be selected (Greater Philadelphia Secondary Mathematics Project, 2003).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

High attrition rates of principals and the shortage of candidates to fill vacancies make initiatives to improve principal retention increasingly important. Although the importance of studying the retention of Catholic school principals has been suggested by prior research (Cavanagh, 2001), few studies have been undertaken to explore this phenomenon.

Given the importance of retaining principals in Catholic schools, the researchers initiated a study to explore the factors that are influential in principals' job retention. The intent of the authors was to increase awareness of the issues that influence principals to leave their jobs and discover the prerequisites for successful retention.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted in a Midwestern Catholic diocese. The diocese was selected for its geographic accessibility to the researchers and the practicality of conducting personal interviews. Most notably, during the 3 consecutive years prior to the commencement of the study, 25 of the 80 (31.25%)

principals in the diocese had left the principalship or moved to a principalship in a different school. Each of these 25 principals received an invitation to participate in the study, a narrative survey to complete, and an invitation to participate in a personal interview. Of the invited participants, 22 (88%) responded. While a small number of them indicated willingness to participate in a personal interview, only 75% of those were actually available for an interview. The purposive sampling procedures and small number of participants decreased the ability to generalize the findings of the study.

## **PROCEDURES**

Narratives and interviews were coded for content and analyzed for themes. The qualitative methodology of member checks, multiple sources of information, and coding and reviewing data for verification enhanced the validity and reliability of data (Creswell, 1994; Frankel & Wallen, 1996).

The narrative questionnaire consisted of five sections. The first section focused on demographic data while the remaining four sections asked broad questions related to reasons for changing positions, reasons for discontinuing service as a school principal, perceived drawbacks of the principal's role, circumstances that might prompt a person to return to a Catholic school principalship, and reasons for continuing in the role of Catholic school principal. The questionnaire, written by the researchers after a review of the literature, appears in the Appendix.

## **RESEARCHERS**

The two researchers who conducted the study were experienced in the field of school administration. One researcher was a former principal of Catholic and public secondary schools and an assistant professor of education. The second researcher was a former principal of Catholic elementary schools and an associate professor of education. The study evolved from the researchers' belief that knowledge of the factors contributing to the retention of principals is necessary to ensure a continuing supply of high quality leaders for Catholic schools.

## **FINDINGS**

### **DEMOGRAPHICS**

The initial portion of the survey asked respondents about their educational level, religious affiliation, gender, age, teaching and administrative experience, economic support of themselves and their families, contract status at the time of their position change, current employment, and positions assumed after making their changes. A summary of the data follows and is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Demographics of Respondents, N = 22*

Variable		Elementary Principals <i>n</i> = 16	Secondary Principals <i>n</i> = 6
Highest Degree	Ph.D./Ed.D.	1	2
	Specialist	2	2
	M.A./M.S.	11	2
	No response/other	2	0
Religion	Catholic	16	6
Gender	Male	4	4
	Female	12	2
Age	30s	1	1
	40s	6	2
	50s	6	3
	60s	2	0
	Other	1	0
Teaching Experience	Catholic schools only	8	3
	Public schools only	1	1
	Catholic and public schools	7	2
Administrative Experience	Catholic schools only	15	2
	Public schools only	0	0
	Catholic and public schools	1	4
	Elementary only	11	0
	Secondary only	0	4
	Both	5	2
Years of Administrative Experience	Fewer than 10 years	7	3
	Between 10 and 19 years	7	2
	20 or more years	2	1
Primary Family Provider	Yes	6	6
	No	9	0
	No Response	1	0
Stability of Last School	Enrollment	Yes	6
		No	6
	Finances	Yes	5
		No	2
	Parents/Community	Yes	7
		No	0
		No Response	9
			4

The number of high school principals responding totaled 6, and 16 were elementary principals. The Masters degree was the most common level of academic achievement. Four respondents possessed the Specialist degree and 3 the Doctorate. All of the 14 female and 8 male respondents were Catholic. A total of 11 of the respondents had taught only in Catholic

schools, while 9 had taught in both Catholic and public systems. Two had taught only in public schools. Seventeen principals had served only Catholic schools, while 5 reported service as principal in both public and Catholic schools. Nearly equal numbers of principals responding reported service as a principal for fewer than 10 years compared with those reporting 10 years or more. Three respondents had served as a principal for 20 or more years, and they had served in significantly more schools than those with fewer years of administrative experience. Twelve respondents indicated that they were the major economic support of themselves or their families, while 9 indicated they were not. Eight principals indicated that the school they left was stable in enrollment, while 6 indicated it was not; 7 indicated the school to be stable financially, with 2 saying the school was not stable; and 9 indicated stability in terms of community and parent stability. Unfortunately, there were 13 principals who did not respond to this series of questions.

All of the respondents' previous principalships, save one, were secured by a contract offered by either a priest-pastor (typical of elementary school settings) or the president or governing body of a secondary school. All reported a contract period of 1 year. One participant, however, reported being informed at the time of termination that only one initial contract for the first year as principal had been executed and that the next 7 years were served "at the pleasure of the governing body." In other words, this principal had been working without a contract, although there was a good faith assumption to the contrary.

Of the 22 respondents, 8 continued in the Catholic school principalship in different schools, but 14 did not return to the Catholic school principalship. Of those 14, 6 continued to serve Catholic schools in other administrative roles; 7 moved into other roles in education outside of Catholic schools; and 1 left the education field.

## EMERGING THEMES

The following themes emerged from the results of the study.

- Personal needs (welfare)
- Career advancement
- Conflict in school governance
- Conditions for continuing employment
- Recommendations for retention

Each of these themes will be explored further and discussed.

### PERSONAL NEEDS

Personal and family needs were reported as important factors by respondents who left the principalship and sought career changes. Considerations includ-

ed finding a better location, a more flexible schedule, avoiding burnout, and improving a spouse's employment options. One principal stated,

Personal welfare is important. The way I look at it now is really different than when I had kids in school. Actually [the new job pays more] money, but that is way down the list. The personal issues are most important.

Another principal noted,

When I made the switch from principal to president, compensation was significant ...don't try to give me less money because I'm a woman. I asked for the same dollars as the previous president. I didn't want to feel like I was the bargain person. [Money] is not as significant now.... I'm not trying to get rich at the school.

Other principals who left the principalship cited reasons such as returning to a metro area, an area where a family resides, and a hometown. The demands on the principal were seen as growing, even causing family distress, such that a number returned to teaching.

## CAREER ADVANCEMENT

The desire for career change within the education field prompted a number of the respondents to leave the principalship. Of the 14 respondents who left the principalship, 6 continued to serve Catholic schools in other administrative roles, 7 assumed roles in education outside of Catholic schools, and 1 left the education field. Positions assumed by respondents who left the principalship included archdiocesan administrator, state department of education official, Catholic school president, teacher, substitute teacher, university professor, and school business director. These principals said their new positions involved more responsibility and offered opportunities for career advancement. Another respondent explained in an interview,

The primary reason [for the move] is the attraction of the new job. [The school is] coed rather than just male. The secondary reason is the re-organization of the administration [at the former school]. I'm not using my gifts, strengths...[and] am asked to do some things I'm not very good at.

A secondary respondent said, "I could do the job as well as anybody else. I want to be in charge. It was the next step...the only one left for me here." Another elementary respondent seeking career advancement reported in an interview,

I had been in administration about 20 years and was looking for a change...[I] felt it was time...[I needed] other things to do. I had hoped to get into small college teaching [but] I found out I needed the doctorate. I enjoyed the opportuni-

ty to move into schools where there were enrollment challenges and into development...gave me the opportunity to work with more people and attract more people to Catholic schools.

## **CONFLICTS IN SCHOOL GOVERNANCE**

Respondents, all of whom were experienced principals, reported that conflicts in school governance, changes in the school's vision, and politics prompted them to leave schools. A few respondents reported that conflicts resulted in non-renewal of their contracts. Priests were often mentioned as the central figure in the conflict. The principals' comments descriptive of governance conflicts included inability to work with an autocratic pastor, a pastoral change that altered school governance procedures regarding parents, and being deceived by a secondary chief administrator. One respondent reported during an interview,

[I experienced governance issues] as a principal originally [and as] president eventually...in terms of who's in charge. First thing [my superior] did was appoint a group of four of his colleagues in the religious order who met regularly on the big issues. They were going over things they didn't have information about. The reason for this is that the [religious] community needed to be involved in decisions at the highest level. It happens that in my tenure they are re-affirming their authority. Originally I reported to those groups, but I didn't have to ask their authority. A private school run by an order like this...it's a dicey subject.

An elementary respondent explained,

The board of education does have an influence in the school you select. You need to ask questions about the board and the pastor. The pastor will listen to them [the board]... you can't allow yourself to get caught up in some power struggles. You have to be careful of it because the interest of the kids gets lost. The previous pastor and I didn't see eye to eye on issues always. But he delegated the school to me because he knew I knew that area. I felt the opinions I gave him were heavily weighed. [But I] didn't always feel that way in the last situation. The board played a role. Different people wanted different things, and I didn't agree with it as an educator. I felt that the principal had been more effective before. Administrative issues were seen as just that.

## **CONDITIONS FOR RETURNING TO THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL PRINCIPALSHIP**

The 14 respondents who left the service of Catholic schools as principals were asked to describe the circumstances that might prompt them to return to a position as Catholic school principal. Many of their responses reflected bitterness and frustration. As one former principal said, "[I would return]

...probably if I was starving and could get no other work!"

A few former principals reported that they would return under certain conditions such as clear pastor/chief administrator-board-principal authority lines, appropriate diocesan support and involvement in conflict resolution, and a stable fiscal situation. One respondent, who reported having secured a new position with a harmonious working relationship, described the factors involved,

The board is advisory to the president. It's very comfortable. I listen to their advice if I ask a question. There are no [conflicting governance] issues. It works here. My relationship with the board is so good that they would support me if someone tried to get me out. One thing that plays into that is that the board is selected by me and by the board itself.

## LINGERING IMPRESSIONS

Although some of the respondents who had left the principalship were adamant about not returning, they seemed to hold little bitterness. In fact, when asked what they might tell fellow educators who aspired to the principalship, the respondents who were interviewed reported that they thought the Catholic school principalship was a wonderful opportunity to be dedicated to the school and the Church's mission, to affect change, to be responsible, and to impact student learning.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study are summarized as follows:

- The satisfaction of personal needs, such as convenience of the school's location to home and flexibility of school workload, were issues that influenced moves to different schools.
- The desire for change in position or career advancement prompted principals to leave the principalship and, sometimes, Catholic education.
- Compensation was not a major consideration in job choice.
- Conflict with pastors, secondary school presidents/heads of schools, and governing bodies was a significant cause for principals leaving the principalship.
- Some principals who left the principalship did so to assume a different role in Catholic education. Others left Catholic education and did not plan to return.
- The suggestions of respondents reveal information that may be useful in retaining current principals.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The principals in this study did not leave their jobs because they disliked being principals. By all reports, they seemed to enjoy their work and relished their impact on Catholic education. They left their jobs because of changing personal needs, pursuit of career opportunities, or conflict with governing authorities. While attrition due to changing personal needs is unavoidable, solutions to alleviate attrition caused by lack of career opportunity in Catholic education and governance conflict are available.

Attrition in the study was generated, in some instances, by the absence of a standardized salary scale for administrators. Principals competed for schools in which salaries were higher, often seeking larger schools or those in a metropolitan area. In essence, the schools within the diocese were competing with themselves to attract and retain principals.

Interestingly, although most of the participants in the study were in their 40s and 50s, with a couple in their 60s, not a single one of the respondents left the principalship to retire, a common reason for principal attrition in the public sector. One possible explanation for this is the absence of retirement benefits in the Catholic schools that match those provided in the public sector.

Of the respondents in the study, 9 of 22 had both public and Catholic school teaching experience, and 5 had been principals in both systems. Those statistics raise a question about whether such differences in expectations related to governance and authority relationships affect the pastor-chief administrator/principal relationship. Additional questions may have to do with the expectation of those with service in both public and private systems regarding compensation, benefits, continuing employment, and retirement. When considering the administrative staffing of Catholic schools in the future, the literature suggests that system leadership must take steps to minimize such disincentives (Canavan, 2001).

One disincentive is the lack of career advancement opportunities. Several principals in the study left the principalship and Catholic education for positions to advance their careers. Continued absence of a continuum of leadership opportunities poses a significant threat to the retention of the most gifted leaders in any diocese. When opportunities are not available, talented principals leave: not only the diocese, but perhaps Catholic education as well.

Conflict with a pastor, president/chief administrator, or governing body emerged as a major factor in principal attrition. Recent writers (Brock & Fraser, 2001; Campbell, 2000) have noted the critical relationship of the Catholic elementary school principal and the parish pastor, who is the chief administrator in reality. Ciriello (1996) notes that "the administration of Catholic schools is ordinarily site-based" (p. vii), that "by Canon Law the pastor is the administrator of the entire parish, including the school" (p. 89), and "the fact remains that the current Catholic Church functions essentially

as a hierarchy or monarchy" (p. 127). The themes of pastoral authority, interpersonal qualities, and role differentiation have been identified, among others, as critical in an effective Catholic school leadership approach (Brock & Fraser, 2001). The parish school principal must communicate well with the pastor if she/he expects his support. Likewise, the pastor/chief executive must support the principal and exhibit trust by not allowing the chain of command to be short-circuited. All involved, including a lay board, must understand the daily operation of the school to be the primary role of the principal. Pastors and secondary school chief executives "should not interfere in conflicts between parents and school personnel" (Brock & Fraser, 2001, p. 94). When these procedures break down and pastors or chief executives attempt to run the school, conflict is the inevitable result.

The literature notes that minimizing disincentives and assuring a good match between individuals, specific principalships, and school/parish cultures is essential to the success of the organization and the principal (Canavan, 2001). Based on the findings of this study and literature in the field, the authors offer the following recommendations for principal retention:

- Prospective Catholic school administrators should be briefed and screened before employment as principals to determine their willingness to accept the ultimate authority of the pastor/chief executive. If coming from a public school background, each principal needs to know that the pastor likely has not been trained as a school chief executive to the same degree as a public school superintendent. Each principal should also understand the role of the pastor, aspects of successful pastor/principal relationships, and potential pitfalls.
- Priests should receive more pastoral formation and supervision in the role they need to play in the administration of the parish school prior to assignment. Those pastors who have successfully managed a parish school in the context of the total parish might provide such formation and supervision.
- When conflicts arise, diocesan school officials should provide some conflict mediation service if the conflicts become serious.
- While it may be positive that a career path exists for school principals to "move up" to the role of president or diocesan administrator, the career path leading to the principalship must be refined and candidates cultivated. Attention should be given to incentives and disincentives.
- Relationships between size of school and urban/rural settings to salary levels should be minimized so principals do not have to change schools or locations to make gains in compensation.
- Adequate retirement systems should be established for principals (and all Catholic school employees).
- Further research should be conducted to compare the results of this localized study to determine any regional or national trends.

Retaining Catholic school principals in a climate in which fewer individuals seek the principalship is critical to continued quality leadership in Catholic education. When principals leave their positions, not only is the continuity of leadership interrupted, but a discouraging message is also imparted to future candidates. An improvement of job quality factors in the principalship is necessary to encourage retention of current principals, as well as make the role more attractive to newcomers.

Several factors limited the findings of this study. First, data gathered were based on the objectivity and reliability of the researchers. Typical of narrative data gathering, informant integrity becomes an issue of rigor. Finally, the research was confined to one geographic area, limiting the generalizability of findings. Despite these limitations, the results of the study revealed the viewpoints of a group of principals who had left their positions. The data are not presented as infallible explanations, but as a basis for further inquiry and discussion. Clearly, additional research into the interrelated factors of leadership retention and recruitment are needed to ensure the continuation of a supply of high quality leaders for Catholic schools.

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## APPENDIX

## **Survey Instrument**

*Dear Administrator:*

*Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey. Respond to each of the items keeping in mind that all responses will be anonymous and confidential. If you have any questions about completing the survey, please e-mail Dr. Patrick Durow at [wpdurow@creighton.edu](mailto:wpdurow@creighton.edu). Thank you for taking the time to respond!*

#### **A.      Forced choice demographic questions.**

1. Please indicate (with a check) your most advanced academic degree:  
\_\_\_\_(a) Ph.D./Ed.D. \_\_\_\_ (b) Specialist \_\_\_\_ (c) M.A./M.S. \_\_\_\_ (d) Other

2. \_\_\_\_ Are you Catholic? (a) yes (b) no

3. \_\_\_\_ What is your gender? (a) male (b) female

4. \_\_\_\_ What is your age?

5. How many years of **TEACHING** experience have you completed?  
a. \_\_\_\_ in Catholic schools?  
  
b. \_\_\_\_ in public schools?  
  
c. \_\_\_\_ in some other educational enterprise (Sylvan, community college, university, other non-public school, etc.)

6. Please indicate the number of years and level(s) at which (K-5, K-6, K-8)  
a. \_\_\_\_ number of years in middle/junior high schools (organized by any grades 5-8)  
  
b. \_\_\_\_ number of years in high schools (9-12)

7. How many years have you completed as a **FULL-TIME PRINCIPAL** through June, 2001?  
a. \_\_\_\_ number of years in Catholic schools  
  
b. \_\_\_\_ in how many Catholic schools did your experience occur?  
  
c. \_\_\_\_ number of years in public schools  
  
d. \_\_\_\_ in how many public schools did your experience occur?  
  
e. \_\_\_\_ number of years in other non-public schools?  
  
f. \_\_\_\_ In how many other non-public schools did your experience occur?  
  
g. \_\_\_\_ number of years served fulltime in other school administrative positions through June 2001  
  
h. \_\_\_\_ number of years served in current position through June 2001

8.  In your employment as principal, are you/were you the major economic support of yourself or family? Please respond with either "a" or "b." (a) yes (b) no
9.  Are you currently employed as a school principal? (a) yes (b) no  
(If yes, answer questions 10 – 14; if no, move ahead to section B)
10.  My current school is (a) a Catholic school (b) a public school
11.  In years, approximately how long do you plan to continue in your current position?
12.  What is the total student enrollment in your current school?
13.  How many staff members do you supervise in your current school?
14. Would you say that your current school is stable in terms of:
  - a.  student enrollment? (a) yes (b) no
  - b.  finances? (a) yes (b) no
  - c.  community/parental support? (a) yes (b) no

**B. If you have changed your Catholic school principalship in the past 3 years, please respond to the following questions:**

15. Please list the three most important reasons that influenced you to change your position in Catholic school administration to another Catholic school during the past 3 years:
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.

**C. If you have discontinued service to the Catholic schools as a principal during the past 3 years, please respond to these questions:**

16. Why did you discontinue service as a principal to a Catholic school?
17. What is your new position?
18. What circumstances would prompt you to return to the Catholic school principalship?

**D. Would you be willing to participate in a telephone or personal interview to discuss issues related to the Catholic school principalship? If so, please indicate the telephone number and e-mail address at which you wish to be contacted.**

Yes      Telephone \_\_\_\_\_      e-mail \_\_\_\_\_  
 No

**Thank you for responding to these questions. We value your time! We hope to publish our comparison data during 2002.**